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To sir, with love: Messages for educators from gifted financially disadvantaged young people

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2000, 2012) has continued to identify young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds as one of six groups who are consistently underrepresented in gifted and talented programmes in New Zealand schools. This paper reports on a research project that explored the lived experiences of 101 gifted young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These young people were invited to reflect on questions related to recognition and perceptions of their abilities, school and classroom provisions, and aspects of their schooling that limited or enabled the development of their talents. Three key messages that are relevant to educators emerged from their responses. These messages highlighted the importance of relationships, the pressure to perform and the main source of their drive to achieve. This paper provides a starting point for considering how gifted, financially disadvantaged students might be effectively supported to develop their potential.

Introduction

Sidney Poitier, in the 1967 hit film *To sir, with love*, won the hearts of many through his role as an African American teacher in London's East End slums. Based on Braithwaite's (1959) autobiographical novel, this film highlighted the social and racial undertones in an inner-city school, with Poitier challenging his students to rise above the prejudicial barriers so blatantly conveyed through their own impoverished existence within the British class system. Although dated now, this story is arguably still reflective of current social and racial concerns around the globe. Fast-forward almost 50 years and, despite vast differences between New Zealand's current sociocultural context and London's 20th century sprawling slums, an increasing number of children and young people in New Zealand are living in financially challenging situations.

Poverty in New Zealand

New Zealand does not have an official poverty measure, which makes defining and reporting accurately on poverty rates difficult. However, various indicators used by government and other agencies signal that poverty rates for children have doubled over the last 30 years (Perry, 2014; Simpson, Duncanson, Oben, Wicken, & Pierson, 2015). A measure for poverty commonly used in official reports in New Zealand is a household equivalent disposable income set at 60% of the median, after adjusting for housing costs (Boston, 2014; Simpson et. al, 2014). Using this measure, the most recently reported estimate of the number of children living in poverty in New Zealand is 305,000 or 29% (Simpson et al., 2015). A major concern is that of these children, three out of five live in poverty that persists over at least seven years (Craig, Reddington, Wicken, Oben, & Simpson, 2013). It is well recognised that the timing, severity and persistence of poverty increases the possibility of poor outcomes for children in a range of areas, including education (Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty [EAG], 2013; Simpson et al., 2015). Also significant is that rates of poverty for Māori and Pacific ethnic groups have remained consistently double that of their European counterparts, regardless of the measure of poverty used (Boston, 2014; Perry, 2014). Other groups of children who are particularly vulnerable are those living in single parent families and children who are dependents of benefit recipients (EAG, 2013; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015; Simpson et. al, 2015).

The Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty (2012) usefully outlines three lenses through which the effects of poverty on children's outcomes can be viewed. The first of these posits that low income results in parents having less to "invest" in children. In practical terms, this means being unable to afford basic necessities, including food and medical care, and resources that help their children get ahead,

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such as computers or school field trips. Another possible consequence of low income is high levels of stress, which influences a parent's capacity to be supportive, consistent and involved in their children's lives. A third, more recent notion is that family poverty can affect particular biological systems of the child either before or after birth because of factors such as maternal mental health and parenting styles (Aber, Morris, & Raver, 2012; Ziol-Guest, Duncan, Kalil, & Boyce, 2012).

While it would be tenuous to view these perspectives of the effects of poverty in isolation, what is evident is that the array of negative outcomes associated with poverty cannot be denied. An increasing number of studies are highlighting the impacts of poverty on children in particular, and these effects have been shown to endure into adulthood (EAG, 2012; Gibb, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2012; Wynd, 2011). These studies also indicate that the effects of poverty tend to be cumulative. For example, a survey of 96 New Zealand children and young people (Egan-Bitran, 2010) indicated that common effects of living in poverty included a lack of food, clothing and warmth. A number of the young people surveyed in this study also mentioned poverty-related neglect, abuse and violence. Many of them had little hope for their futures and outlined how the stress of living in poverty had driven them to indulge in risky behaviours, such as the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

Near the end of 2012, an Expert Advisory Group, commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, outlined 78 recommendations for alleviating child poverty in New Zealand (EAG, 2012). These recommendations included that the government monitor five different poverty measures to more fully capture the complex contexts within which New Zealand families are living (Simpson et. al, 2014). As yet, there has been little commitment from the current government to implement these recommendations. In response to this lack of action, the Office of the Children's Commissioner, in partnership with the University of Otago, and the J. R. McKenzie Trust have taken the initiative to provide an annual report on measurements of child poverty in New Zealand (Craig, Reddington, Wicken, Oben, & Simpson, 2013; Simpson et al. 2014, 2015).

Effects of poverty on the gifted and talented learner

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2000, 2012) continues to recognise children and young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds as being consistently underrepresented in gifted and talented programmes in New Zealand schools. Over the past few years, there have been several calls to address the particular needs of gifted children from low decile schools and the need for sampling from lower socioeconomic families (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Riley, 2004; Versteynen, 2001). A challenge associated with research such as this is that these young people are not readily identified, hence their underrepresentation in gifted education programmes. Perhaps as a consequence, the calls have remained relatively unanswered amongst researchers in New Zealand.

The distinct gap in New Zealand literature related to provisions for financially disadvantaged gifted and talented young people means that there is limited understanding of their specific educational experiences. While there has been research undertaken in this area internationally, and particularly in the United States (e.g. Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2000; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Swanson, 2006), these studies do not specifically reflect New Zealand's unique sociocultural context. However, there has been increasing exploration in New Zealand of the experiences of gifted and talented Māori and Pasifika young people, who represent another group of learners consistently underrepresented in gifted education programmes (Bevan-Brown, 1999, 2011a, 2011b; Faaea-Semeatu, 2011; Macfarlane & Moltzen, 2005; Miller, 2011; Webber, 2011a, 2011b). Given the high number of Māori and Pasifika young people also living in low socioeconomic situations (Perry, 2014), this work may provide useful insights to inform future studies related to gifted children and young people living in poverty. One common thread that has emerged from this work with gifted Māori and Pasifika learners is the importance of identity.

Ballam (2013) provides a comprehensive analysis of how giftedness and socioeconomic disadvantage might interact and intersect, using Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological framework. This analysis emphasises that understanding the experiences of gifted learners from financially disadvantaged backgrounds requires consideration of both their individual gifts as well as complex environmental conditions that might be specific to their personal circumstances. These include aspects such as differences between what is valued as a gift or talent by New Zealand society in general, specific cultural groups living in New Zealand and the gifted learner themselves. Other aspects include the direct and indirect impacts of stressors related to living in poverty, and

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individual characteristics such as personality traits.

The presence and persistence of underachievement amongst gifted and talented individuals is a significant issue as society loses the long-term benefit of their potential (Moltzen, 2011). Perhaps more importantly, gifted children and young people who underachieve represent an unrealised fulfilment of personal potential, which is likely to impact wellbeing (Siegle & McCoach, 2002). The remainder of this paper reports on a study that attempts to provide understanding of what it might mean for New Zealand young people to be highly competent and experiencing potential challenges associated with financial disadvantage (Ballam, 2013). Particular emphasis has been given to the personal messages from the young people in this study to educators of gifted and talented children living in low socioeconomic circumstances.

Data sources and methods

The participants in this study were sourced from First Foundation, an organisation that provides scholarships to talented young New Zealanders from financially disadvantaged backgrounds who are in their second to last year of secondary schooling. These scholarships provide an opportunity for recipients to pursue tertiary education where they may otherwise not have been able to due to socioeconomic limitations. At the time of this study, 181 young people had received scholarships from First Foundation over the years since its inception in 1998. Of these, 93 responded to an online survey reflecting on their experiences as gifted young people growing up in low socioeconomic situations. Eight also participated in more in depth interviews.

One of the challenges of this research was to determine what constituted 'giftedness' and 'socioeconomic adversity' in the context of this study. In relation to giftedness, it was considered that the schools nominating young people to receive First Foundation scholarships would base their identification of and provisions for gifted and talented students on recommendations from the Ministry of Education (2012) guidelines. These guidelines support a multicategorical approach to giftedness (Gagné, 2005; Gardner, 1983; Riley, 2004). They also pay attention to diverse cultural concepts of giftedness (Bevan-Brown, 1999, 2011a; Webber, 2011b). The set criterion for First Foundation scholarship recipients is that they are amongst the top academic performers in their schools for the National Certificate of Educational Attainment (NCEA), the national qualification for New Zealand secondary school students. However, recipients are also expected to possess leadership qualities, or to be involved in creative, cultural, or sporting activities, which are often also a key area of talent for these young people alongside their academic ability.

A limitation of sourcing participants from First Foundation was that the parameters of socioeconomic adversity were fundamentally a matter of trust. In their consideration of potential First Foundation scholarship recipients, schools are asked to identify students who come from households where the combined income is likely to fall below approximately $60,000 NZD per year. This is, of course, dependent on the accuracy of information passed on to the school by caregivers. The fact that scholarships were awarded to talented young people who attended low decile schools, however, means that recipients are more likely to live in lower socioeconomic households and neighbourhoods.

At the time of research, all of the participants were aged between 17 and 27 years. Most had completed the majority of their schooling in New Zealand, with 79 of the 101 participants having spent at least 10 years in New Zealand schools. These young people represented a mix of gender and a range of ethnicities. Each had been identified as academically gifted by their respective schools, and most also had talents in several other areas. Additional talents tended to be those that are more readily recognised within school settings, and included leadership, creative arts, and sporting talents in particular. Table 1 indicates the demographic details of the online survey participants.

The eight interview participants (four female and four male) were selected based on an extensive analysis of their First Foundation profile information. Scholarship recipients were categorised into talent areas and then selected according to their 'degree' of talent based on what was reported in their profiles. At this point, individuals who had been recognised for achievement or performance outside of the school setting, at regional or national levels, were considered to be performing at a higher level than those who had not. Academic and other experts in each field were consulted to advise what might be deemed a 'higher degree' of talent.

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Table 1

Demographic details of online survey participants

Survey participants	Age group	Gender	Ethnicity	Talent area
Total = 93	Under 17yrs = 1 17-21yrs = 73 22-25yrs = 15 Over 25yrs = 4	Male = 26 Female = 67	NZ Māori = 15 NZ European = 38 Pacific Islander = 29[1] Other = 41[2]	Academic = 66 Leadership = 55 Creative Arts = 27 Sports = 23 Other = 4[3]

[1]A number of Pacific nations were represented in the survey, predominantly by Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Fijian, and Niuean individuals.

[2] The discrepancy in numbers here reflects the opportunity for participants to select all ethnicities that they identified with. Other ethnicities represented amongst survey participants included Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Australian, and Latin American.

[3] Participants were also able to nominate more than one area of talent if this was applicable. The total number of responses here indicates that most participants selected more than one talent area.

For example, specific awards that had been won by some scholarship recipients for their performance were considered to be more representative of high achievement than others. At the completion of this process, the top students in each of the four talent areas (academic, leadership, creative arts, sports) had been identified. These young people were then filtered against further criteria for participation in the interview process, which included having completed all of their schooling in New Zealand and representation of a range of ethnicities. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of the interview participants. Table 2 outlines specific details related to each interviewee:

Table 2 Demographic details of interview participants

Interview participants (pseudonyms)	Age (at time of interview)	Gender	Ethnicity	Major talent area
Laura	22	F	European	Creative arts (visual)
Jennae	22	F	European	Creative arts (dance)
Niu	22	M	Niuean/European	Sport
Matiu	22	M	Māori	Leadership
Kris	20	M	Māori/European	Sport
Ben	19	M	Samoan	All rounder
Aroha	18	F	Māori	Leadership
Sarah	17	F	Chinese/Cambodian	Academic

The online survey included 27 questions that were divided into sections related to the participants' personal characteristics (i.e., demographic information, such as age, gender and ethnicity), their gifts and talents, their childhood and school experiences, their

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relationships, and their socioeconomic circumstances. The purpose of the survey was to gather a broad picture of the experiences of talented young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The survey questions, which were developed in consultation with academic colleagues working in the field of gifted education, included: (a) who or what had been most influential in the development of their gifts and talents, (b) challenges they had faced that had impacted on the development of their talents, (c) when they had been identified as gifted, (d) who identified them as gifted, and (e) their perceptions of how their abilities had been nurtured throughout their schooling. The data collected from the surveys were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby concepts and phrases relevant to the research questions were initially coded and assigned to different categories, before being organised into themes.

The semi-structured interview questions were informed by the themes derived from the survey data, with the aim of eliciting more in depth and contextualised details of these young people's life experiences. Among the interview questions were questions that asked participants to reflect on: (a) their own ideas of giftedness and what they might attribute their high achievements to, (b) the benefits and limitations of being gifted, (c) significant people or events that had influenced their talent development, both positively and negatively, (d) the benefits and limitations of growing up in low socioeconomic circumstances, and (e) how their socioeconomic circumstances had impacted on their talent development, and vice versa, over their lives to date. A sample of questions from the interview schedule was provided to participants to allow time for reflection prior to each interview. The interview participants each nominated a time and location, including their respective places of study, local cafes and, for one, her art studio. Each interview generally lasted between one and two hours. Following the interviews, email contact was maintained so that the participants could add information, and the researcher could seek clarification of details.

One of the aims of the overall study was to capture the voices of the young people themselves by exploring the perceptions, evaluations and attributions they held in relation to both their giftedness and personal circumstances. To achieve this, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed to be appropriate for the transcription and analysis of data from the interviews. This methodology allows the researcher to gain an 'inside view' of participants' lived experiences (Willig, 2001). A distinct characteristic of IPA is the importance of the individual case, and Smith and Osborn (2008) argue that IPA is concerned with underlying cognitions that the individual uses to make sense of their world. What participants disclose gives insight into their cognitions and emotions and, in essence, the researcher is interpreting how each individual is making sense of their experiences. Thus the ways in which participants articulate their experiences and the researcher's careful exploration of the participants' perceptions is crucial.

An advantage of IPA is that there are detailed procedural guides for the analysis of data, which provide a systematic guide to the process (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2004). To begin, notes are made of the transcript about anything significant or of interest, such as statements made by the participants, the type of language used, body language and other observations the researcher may have made (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Following this, emerging themes that capture a higher level of abstraction are noted. Connections are then sought between the emergent themes, at which point subordinate themes may become apparent. A table of themes is constructed and, during the final stage of analysis, themes less evident in the transcript are discarded. To maintain the integrity of the individual case, each transcript is analysed completely before moving to the next.

In this study, themes established for the first case were used as a guide and, as each subsequent case was analysed, more emerging themes were added. Earlier transcripts were then reviewed in light of any new themes, consistent with the iterative procedures of IPA. The three final themes that were drawn from the emerging patterns across cases were 'Opportunities', 'Identity' and 'Drive'.

Messages for educators

From the themes that emerged from this study, three key messages were derived, with specific relevance for educators and other professionals working with children and young people who are gifted and growing up in financially challenging circumstances.

Message 1: Funding and tangible resources are important to us…BUT…your relationships with us are much more important

It would probably seem logical that specific opportunities play a significant role in the development of young people's gifts and talents. The participants in this study identified the types of opportunities that had been most beneficial for them throughout their school years, and explained how these had impacted with their

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giftedness and personal circumstances to further their talent development. For example several mentioned the First Foundation scholarship each had been awarded, and talked about the difference this had made for them. As one participant pointed out, "…[the scholarship] provides me with financial support but also has given me work experiences and a mentor, and all that has been very beneficial for me." Other tangible resources mentioned by participants in the school context included access to extracurricular and developmental opportunities, and subsidised sports fees, amongst others.

Throughout the participants' responses, however, it became clear that aspects of self and relationships with others were considered to be more valuable to many of them than tangible funding or resource opportunities. Survey participants were asked what had helped them to develop their gifts and talents and the most common responses related to having confidence and high expectations of themselves and support from family members. Respondents also indicated that supportive schools and teachers had a significant influence on their talent development. Friends, role models and mentors, such as coaches, were mentioned also, but were not regarded to be as influential in the talent development process.

With the exception of Laura, all of the interview participants described how influential teachers had been in their talent development, and many fondly identified them by name. For example, Niu talked about his relationships with two teachers in particular. One he described as "an honorary grandparent" because of her ongoing support for him and his family, and this relationship continued after he left the school. Another of his teachers offered him valuable additional opportunities to pursue sporting and creative interests. Aroha, who confessed that she had not been the most well behaved student during her early high school years, described one teacher who had seen beyond this and "*really* pushed me when other teachers gave up on me".

Participants outlined that relationships with their teachers and other professionals were not only a source of support and encouragement, but they also offered crucial access to additional opportunities. One example of this was highlighted in Matiu's interview, when he mentioned talking to a teacher about his interest in politics and joking that he wanted to be the next Prime Minister. Following this conversation, the teacher arranged for Matiu to be given the opportunity to fly to Wellington as a representative at a parliamentary youth forum. Others described how teachers had provided opportunities to enrol in university papers, spent additional time preparing them for extracurricular exams and continued to support them in similar ways once students had left school. Another relational aspect commonly reported by participants as important was the explicit modelling by teachers of qualities that inspired them (mainly drive, determination and passion) and capabilities that they aspired to.

Even those participants who felt that attending low decile schools had been a disadvantage mentioned that their relationships with specific teachers had compensated for some of the physical limitations of their school environments. Sarah stated: "I've always had this kind of grudge, like with my mum and dad…I'm just like, 'how come I never got to go to these top decile ten schools?'" She went on to say "I've kind of realised now that it is *sometimes* about the school…but it's mainly about just making the most of what we have right here." Sarah described the teachers at her low decile school as influential, as they had realised her passion for working with aid organisations, and given her opportunities to connect with people working in this area.

Of course, not all of the young people in this study had good relationships with their teachers and, to the same extent that positive relationships were fundamental in terms of talent development, less supportive relationships with teachers appeared to have quite a damaging effect. Survey participants who did not enjoy their school experiences mostly attributed this to teachers who were discouraging and, as one described, "nit-picky". These young people generally indicated that their indifferent attitudes were due to a lack of challenge by teachers who regularly left them to their own devices. Others, particularly those who were creatively gifted, felt that their talents were undervalued and that teachers gave more support to those who were inclined more towards exceptional academic achievement. Laura's experience as a gifted mathematician and equally talented visual artist saw her being strongly advised to pursue the more traditional academic career pathway. When she resisted and dropped her academic subjects for the arts, she missed out on an academic award to which she was entitled; it left her devastated and coloured her entire perception of her schooling experiences. Since leaving school, and despite the advice of her teachers, Laura has gone on to receive national awards for her talents in visual arts.

The examples noted here have important implications for those who work with talented young people in low decile schools, as it appears that building positive relationships that nurture

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self-belief and optimism could empower individuals to more confidently navigate fiscal challenges. These examples should not be interpreted as a suggestion that it is not necessary to provide gifted young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds with tangible opportunities, such as funding and other resources. What this research does confirm is that strong, supportive relationships with other people are crucial for enabling the talent development process (Moltzen, 2005). It appears that the young people in this study sought out relationships that gave them something against which to evaluate themselves, and which promoted growth and stimulation; this is consistent with the ideas of other researchers and writers in the field of giftedness and talent (Milgram & Palti, 1993; Plomin & Price, 2003; Porter, 2005; Sternberg, 2007).

Message 2: Being gifted and talented generally gives us confidence…BUT…we are significantly affected by the weight of expectations, the pressure to perform and a fear of failure

Aspects of identity were a dominant feature of the participants' stories in this study and the emphasis in their accounts was on the way in which they perceived themselves and how they believed others perceived them. Erikson (1974) broadly conceptualises identity as a sense of personal wellbeing that an individual develops through their interactions with their social environments. The participants in this study referred to identity as self-awareness (self-knowing), self-concept (self esteem and self-worth) and self-assurance (self-confidence and self-belief). These perspectives and perceptions were talked about in relation to both their giftedness and their personal circumstances. Interestingly, a significant finding was that most of these young people perceived their giftedness to have more detrimental effects on their sense of identity and wellbeing than the challenges associated with their personal circumstances.

A majority of the young people who responded to the survey indicated that there were definite personal benefits that came with their giftedness. These included a strong perception of self worth, confidence and a sense of fulfilment. A comment made by a survey participant echoed what many others also said: "Having something that I'm passionate about and good at gives me pride and a sense of self worth…" In his interview, Kris alluded to the personal benefits of being gifted, stating that:

> You get to do things other people probably wouldn't be able to and it gives you more confidence. Even if you're good in one area, I feel more confident even if I know I'm not very good at another area, that I could do it if I put my mind to it.

However, most of the participants also identified that there were definite personal limitations associated with their giftedness. Most commonly cited were the weight of expectations, the pressure to perform and a fear of failure. One respondent to the online survey conveyed that: The expectation is the worst thing by far. People think that you're perfect all the time and therefore when you do make a mistake, they fall on top of you like a ton of bricks…people expect you to be on the ball all the time…

Another commented:

> Everyone has such high expectations of you. It can put quite a lot of pressure on you. I have never failed anything in my life and would like to get it out of the way, because now I am afraid that when I finally do fail something, I will find it hard to deal with.

Several interviewees also outlined how expectations had impacted them. Sarah's experience at high school was that her teachers expected her "to get first in every school subject." Reflecting on her inability to meet these expectations sometimes, she shared that "When they see your results, it makes you feel really bad. I used to beat myself over the head but now I think of it as - I deserve what I get." One consequence of Matiu's giftedness had been a fear of failure, which stemmed from other people's expectations of him and his identity as a young Māori male. He described how his teachers had been encouraging and that, in many ways, their high expectations had been a support for him. However, referring to the reported rates of underachievement associated with Māori students in New Zealand schools, he stated, "What's hard is that when you fail, it seems like you fail on behalf of everyone that you represent." He went on to point out that "You can't stuff up because you know if you stuff up then you'll just be like another statistic."

The detrimental impact of unrealistic expectations and the fear of failure is consistent with the ideas of Pfeiffer and Stocking (2000), who assert that unrealistic expectations of parents, teachers, and significant others is a risk factor common to gifted young people. While it would be tenuous to claim from the findings in this study that giftedness acts as a risk factor for all high achieving individuals, the notion that particular elements of their giftedness might exacerbate risk amongst particular groups would be worthy of further exploration. While some authors have identified links between unrealistic

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expectations and low self-esteem (Pfeiffer & Stocking, 2000), high expectations, accompanied by effective teaching, have also been found to have a positive effect on achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). What appears to be critical here is that educators and others convey sufficient expectation that gifted young people feel challenged, but not overwhelmed.

The fact that the young people in this study provided mixed accounts of the ways in which giftedness impacted on their sense of self emphasises the necessity for caution when generalising about how giftedness influences identity. Mueller (2009) points out that characteristics of giftedness are generally viewed in two ways: first, that these put young people at risk for poor psychological adjustment and, second, that resources which come with giftedness act as a protective factor. It would be unwise to suggest that having high abilities impacts in *either* one of these two ways; rather, the interaction between giftedness and identity appears to be far more complex than this and factors that are unique to the contexts of each gifted individual's life can alter these effects. One of these factors for Matiu was his ethnicity, and the fact that young Māori males were not readily identified as being gifted. While he was definite that his cumulative achievements had boosted his self-confidence, the weight of being representative of a minority amongst other gifted young people often resulted in his reported bouts of low self-esteem.

Message 3: Socioeconomic challenges can be difficult…BUT…we are mostly driven by the desire to change our personal circumstances

Despite appearing less concerned about having material resources and putting more emphasis on the importance of relationships, many participants in this study were very clear that socioeconomic challenges had limited their talent development in various ways. In the online survey, participants were asked to indicate what challenges they had faced that had impacted on their talent development, and financial difficulties were most commonly mentioned. This was closely followed by family struggles and challenges, which participants mostly attributed to socioeconomic stress in the household in further comments. As one survey respondent put it:

> Having financial constraints is often the cause or part of a whole raft of other issues to do with home life. These issues have been my biggest challenge and something that, no matter how successful or talented, I needed support in. And if there had been no support I would likely be dead or in a psych ward.

When interview participants were asked how they felt financial challenges had limited their talent development more specifically, many mentioned external or physical limitations of financial constraints, such as inadequate schools, limited resources, and limited access to extracurricular activities. Other responses to this question referred to personal or intrinsic impacts, such as frustration, stress, embarrassment, and humiliation. For example, Laura described how she felt guilty when her parents bought things to help her to develop her artistic talents because she knew they could not really afford it. Ben referred to the assumptions people made that things were 'okay' at home simply because he came across as talented, smart, and well adjusted. Jennae talked about the embarrassment of having to front up to school with notes saying that her parents could not afford to pay for something this week. Aroha conveyed her feelings of self doubt, and that she could never be like other academically successful children at school because there was always something traumatic happening at home that took all of her coping skills.

Despite the obvious socioeconomic challenges these young people faced, almost all of the interviewees revealed that a direct consequence was a strong desire, determination and drive to change their personal circumstances, and this had been a major motivating factor in terms of their achievements. Matiu referred several times to the poverty cycle his family had existed in for generations. Referring to some of his family members in his interview, he stated, "From the beginning I knew what I wanted to be, you know, and I put it in my head from a young age that it didn't matter what I *wanted* to be, I knew I didn't want to be that." Aroha also described how her home life had become a source of drive for her to succeed: "Being in that environment sort of made me angry and upset that that's the way we had to live and that – that became my motivation."

Interestingly, this drive to change their circumstances also translated into a strong desire to be role models for others faced with the same socioeconomic challenges, particularly family and friends. Matiu explained: "I've witnessed and I've grown up in a life where there is underachievement, there is a poverty cycle, there is violence, there is all of that." He went on to say, "There've been a lot of events that have shaped…why I want to achieve, and at the end of the day, all I want to do is get families out of that cycle." In his second year at university, Matiu had enacted this by renting a

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large house where young Māori students from similar backgrounds could also live. Matiu and his partner had become role models for these young people and were encouraging them to use their abilities to get ahead in life and influence their family situations. Aroha was also adamant to "break the chain of unemployment around my family" by using her talents and efforts to achieve. She explained: "I want to be the first to sort of break through the ice, and then make a path for them."

There are few other studies that indicate a direct association between the participants' high levels of drive and a resolve to improve their socioeconomic circumstances. However, several historic studies indicate that a significant proportion of eminent individuals experienced challenges throughout their childhoods, and some of these challenges may have been a direct result of their socioeconomic situations (Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; Roe, 1952). More recently, in his investigation of the life stories of gifted New Zealand adults, Moltzen (2005) found that the majority of his participants had experienced some hardship throughout their childhood. In his work with creatively gifted individuals, Simonton (1999) suggested that aspects of hardship might play an integral role in the development of talent. The accounts of a majority of young people in the present study reflect Simonton's notion of emotional robustness (or resilience), where individuals are intent on refusing to allow obstacles to stand in the way of their achievements.

The idea that socioeconomic adversity features strongly as a source of drive for talented individuals from financially challenging backgrounds provides an interesting point for further study. With current rates of child poverty in New Zealand being so high (Simpson et al., 2015), the relationship between socioeconomic circumstances and educational achievement is increasingly becoming an area of important focus. Future studies could provide some insight into the complex interrelationship of exceptional ability and poverty.

Limitations of the study

As with all research, there were some limitations of this study. First, and perhaps most significant, is that the participants had been rewarded with scholarships for their high achievement and were therefore likely to be having more positive experiences than gifted underachievers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. A second limitation of this study is that data were gathered at a static point in time, and it may be that following this group of gifted young people into adulthood and across their lives would provide valuable information about the ongoing or long-term impacts of socioeconomic circumstances on gifted individuals. Despite these limitations, insights may be drawn from the lived experiences of the young people who participated in this research.

Implications for educators

There are strong links between the three messages that emerged from this study which indicates clear implications for educators and other professionals who work with gifted, financially disadvantaged children and young people. First, establishing strong and nurturing relationships that convey mutually realistic expectations are optimal for talent development. These relationships empower gifted young people who face socioeconomic challenges to fulfil what drives them to achieve, which appears to commonly be the desire to change their personal circumstances and influence the lives of those close to them.

A related implication for educators is the importance of connections with the families of these young people. The fact that relationships with others in the home environment made such a difference in many of the participants' lives contrasts with assumptions that might exist about low socioeconomic households. Many of the accounts of the young people in this study indicated that their parents and other family members generally valued education and achievement. Forging strong links between school and home might well provide a more solid foundation for young people experiencing the challenges of financial hardship to achieve success in their respective talent areas. Some gifted young people from low socioeconomic households may not necessarily receive adequate support from adults in these environments. In this instance, teachers may inadvertently become role models, who can offer something more than what the young people might see modelled in their home contexts.

Unrealistic expectations, leading to the pressure to perform, and a fear of failure, had major detrimental effects on talent development for the young people who participated in this research. An implication here is the need for educators to carefully balance the provision of or exposure to challenge with appropriate performance expectations. There is clearly a fine line between these, and tipping the balance could mean the difference between a student soaring to great heights and underachieving. It would be reasonable to propose that an element

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of challenge may be a catalyst for effort if there is sufficient reason to confront a particular challenge.

A final implication is the need for educators to be cautious about making assumptions regarding what drives gifted individuals to achieve to high levels. This again highlights the importance of building strong relationships. One of the most positive indications from this study is that socioeconomic challenges do not automatically assume maladaptive outcomes for gifted learners and, instead, may be a key catalyst for positive outcomes in later life. For the young people in this particular study, the desire to change their personal circumstances was a major source of their drive to achieve. However, this does not suggest that all gifted young people who grow up in adverse circumstances inevitably develop high levels of drive or achieve great things; nor does this imply that young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds should be left to face challenges without support or intervention.

Conclusion

As the 1967 hit film *To sir, with love* illustrated, perhaps rather simplistically, young people from all walks of life can experience success and achievement. How this realistically plays out for individuals is far more complex than the fictional stories captured in this almost two-hour story. As the voices of participants reported in this paper have indicated, gifted young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds have some common experiences in their personal, home and school lives that influence whether and how they are able to develop their abilities. The messages conveyed here provide a starting point for educators to consider how they might better support young people from these situations to develop their personal potential, and become valued and valuable contributors to society.

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